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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1629
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
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RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 4344
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2156
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2021
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 2592
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 1438
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2931

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001292

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL
AID/W FOR EE/EA

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: UNHCR HELPS REVISE LAW ON REFUGEES,
BRANCHES OUT TO PROVIDE HIV AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SEMINARS

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: The UN High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) office in Turkmenistan helps integrate a large group of former refugees and works with a much smaller group of current refugees. The UNHCR representative said the number of asylum seekers from Afghanistan to neighboring countries is increasing. UNHCR has reviewed the current law on refugees and provided comments to an inter-ministerial group working on a revision of the law. There could be a new law on refugees as early as 2009. Since UNHCR is part of the UN family, has partnered with a Turkmen organization, and is using government-sanctioned material like the Ruhnama, it has been permitted by the Turkmenistan government to give seminars to local officials in the provinces on HIV prevention and violence against women. END SUMMARY.

REFUGEES AND OTHERS

¶3. (SBU) UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) representative Brita Helleland met September 25 with the Charge to discuss refugee issues in Turkmenistan. Helleland explained that most of the work of her office involves helping in the integration process for the approximately 10,000 former refugees from Tajikistan who received Turkmenistan citizenship in 2004-2005. Working with these former refugees' communities, including native resident neighbors, UNHCR focuses on education, water, sanitation issues, and health. Helleland said much of the work is funded as part of a three-year proposal by the Government of Japan that concludes in 2009.

¶4. (SBU) In addition to the former refugees from Tajikistan, who are ethnic Turkmen, there are also 600 Afghans who reside along the border and in Ashgabat. Most of the Afghans have residence permits and are settled in the country as businessmen and traders. They are members of various ethnic groups, but are not ethnic Turkmen. While many regularly go in and out of Afghanistan on business, said Helleland, they would be persecuted by their families or local officials, for a variety of reasons, if they returned on a permanent basis.

15. (SBU) Helleland said there are about 80 bona fide refugees, from a variety of areas, including Azerbaijan, Chechnya, Armenia, and Afghanistan. Most live in Lebap province, but some live in Ashgabat. Those in Lebap province want to leave. Half of these refugees are Afghan, many of whom cooperated with the Soviets in Afghanistan. She said it is too politically sensitive for them to return home. Some of these refugees applied to be resettled in Sweden, but the Swedes rejected them. Helleland said the number of asylum seekers from Afghanistan to neighboring countries is increasing.

HELPING TURKMENISTAN TO REVISE LEGISLATION

16. (SBU) Helleland said UNHCR does refugee determinations in Turkmenistan, but wants the government to take over this task. UNHCR has been working with the Turkmenistan government to prepare it to make determinations. UNHCR reviewed the current law on refugees and provided comments to an inter-ministerial group composed of officials from MFA, Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, and the Ministry of Justice. There could be a new law on refugees as early as 2009, Helleland said. A group of Turkmen officials left for Lithuania on September 27 to meet with officials there and learn about Lithuania's refugee legislation, and two experts from Lithuania plan to visit Turkmenistan later in the year.

SEMINARS FOR LOCAL COMMUNITIES ON CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS

17. (SBU) UNHCR, working with the local NGO Keik Okara, has

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been allowed to give seminars on HIV, gender-based violence, and malaria to community representatives and local authorities in the provinces. Helleland said that more and more government officials attend these seminars. She offered that they have been able to hold these seminars, because they have a Turkmen partner and because UNHCR uses quotes from former President Niyazov's book, the Ruhnama, to illustrate points. Although the seminars have been well received, the biggest challenge, said Helleland, is that UNHCR needs funding to continue them.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: Turkmenistan is not a major magnet for refugees, so UNHCR also sees its role encompassing seminars on social welfare topics, such as HIV prevention and violence against women. Since UNHCR is part of the UN family, has partnered with a Turkmen organization, and is using government-sanctioned material like the Ruhnama, it is easy for the Turkmenistan government to agree to these seminars.
END COMMENT.
CURRAN